

MIXED BLESSINGS FROM A CAMBRIDGE UNION ©

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PROLOGUE

Letter from my mother, 18 April 1994.

My parents' reaction to the news of my pregnancy was sheer horror. They insisted that it must be kept secret, and I was virtually a prisoner in the house until I could be sent to a home for unmarried mothers, run by nuns in Birmingham. The official story was that I had had a nervous breakdown, and gone to stay with relatives in Ireland to recuperate.

In the spring of 1947 my mother Mary Furlong was twenty, single, and a student in her second year at Cambridge University. Her devout Catholic family lived in Stafford, where she had attended local convent schools before winning a scholarship to study Classics at Newnham College. It was on a visit home in the Lent term that my grandmother discovered her brilliant daughter was pregnant.

My aunt Pat describes how it happened:

Mum was making Mary a summer skirt, and when she went to try it on her it didn't fit around the waist. So mum asked her was she pregnant, and she said yes she was. Mum said when were you going to tell me about it, and she said that she wasn't. She was going to go and jump off a bridge.

This heartrending account sums up the desperation and shame that my mother must have felt. Everything had been going so incredibly well for her up until now. She was the first in her family to go to university. While at Cambridge she won the Goodhart Memorial Prize in

1945 and the Eleanor Purdie Prize in 1946, and she had gained a First in her Classics prelim exams. The Newnham College authorities later informed my grandfather that Mary had a very promising career ahead and was expected to obtain a First in Part 1 of her Tripos. Records I obtained from the college in 2013 noted that she was there for less than two academic years – 1945 until the Lent term of 1947 – and that she left due to illness.

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The initial details my mother revealed about my father were simply that he was a fellow student at Cambridge. It was only after my birth that my grandparents saw I was brown-skinned. Their sense of stigma intensified, as did their fears for the future, as they now felt unable to look after me as their own child.

I am convinced that they would be pleasantly surprised at how my life turned out. Aged twenty-four, I found my father, and the missing piece of my identity. Over forty years later and in my retirement, I can reflect on having fulfilled my childhood dream of becoming a nurse.

I have experienced many upheavals, including being in care until the age of nine, physical abuse by my stepfather and having to leave school at sixteen. There has been immense pride, however, such as being at the forefront of successful campaigns 'from Sickle to Seacole'. In particular, setting up the first nurse-led centre in the UK to support families with sickle cell conditions and being Vice-Chairperson of the charity that raised the funds for Mary Seacole's Memorial Statue. I have also obtained a PhD, become a Professor of Nursing and been awarded a Fellowship of the Royal College of Nursing. In addition, I am a

Commander of the British Empire. What an irony! 'Cool, Black & Exceptional' is how a friend wonderfully defined my CBE.

My grandparents were correct though in realising the negative impact that my arrival would have on my mother's future academic plans. On the brighter side, she was dearly loved by all five of her children, and she was happy that I came to know and love my father. Mixed blessings indeed!